

Chapter 5. Visual Resources

Scenic quality can best be described as the overall impression that an individual retains after driving through, walking through, or flying over an area. Viewer response is a combination of viewer exposure and viewer sensitivity. Judgments of visual quality must be based on a regional frame of reference (U.S. Soil Conservation Service 1978.) The same landform or visual resource appearing in different geographic areas could have a different visual resource quality and sensitivity in each setting. For example, a small hill may be a significant visual element on a flat landscape but have very little significance in mountainous terrain.

Plan Area Visual Resources

The Plan area is in the rolling foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Low profile, ranch style homes, partially concealed by dense vegetation, are common throughout this landscape. Narrow, winding roads without concrete gutters and sidewalks and framed instead by native vegetation, weave through these foothills. The rural residential character is accentuated by small vegetable gardens and occasional pastures that dot the landscape.

Valleys in the Plan area are well enclosed by surrounding hillsides, limiting most view to the foreground and middle ground distance zones. Occasional residences built on higher hilltops have expansive views of the surrounding foothills. Representative visual features include the rural residential community, downtown village commercial center and limited commercial development along Placer Hills Road, major residential roads, and open space.

Throughout the residential community, the mosaic pattern of foothill vegetation and the gently rolling terrain, which are the cornerstone of the Plan area's visual resources, remain largely unaltered. Because of this and the landscape-compatible scale and lines of the residences, views of the rural residential community are moderately vivid and intact.

Major Roads

Views observed from major roads can shape an individual's impression of an area. Views from major residential roads are described below:

Placer Hills Road. Placer Hills Road is a two-lane north/south oriented roadway that serves the heart of the Plan area. The roadway extends from I-80 at the southern extreme of the Plan area, through the downtown area of Meadow Vista, and on north, eventually connecting to the City of Colfax.

Heading north from the Clipper Gap/Meadow Vista interchange, the approximate two-mile approach to the central commercial district is bordered by Ponderosa pine and oak forests. Wooden signs at the entrance to driveways screened with vegetation are the only evidence of residences. From north of Sugar Pine Road to Meadow Vista Road, Placer Hills Road gently declines into the Plan area and crosses over the open Bowman Canal. South of the commercial center, Placer Hills School, Sierra Hills School, and their associated parks, playgrounds, and landscaping provide open, park like views from the roadway.

From Meadow Gate Road heading north to Crother Road, the shoulders narrow, and open views of dry meadows and irrigated pastures are framed by gently rolling hills and forests. Walgra Meadows is a focal point of this area. Open and partially screened views of residences near Crother Road are visible from Placer Hills Road.

Meadow Vista Road. Meadow Vista Road extends west from Placer Hills Road. It begins just north of Meadow Vista Park and ends near the Bear River below Van Giesen Dam. The small valley that it bisects is more open in character than much of the Plan area. Most of the rural residences along Meadow Vista Road are set back in the trees and have large front lawns that extend to the roadside. Heritage oaks are more prevalent than sugar pines in this valley and on its hillsides. Views of the Plan area from Meadow Vista Road are moderately vivid and of good quality.

Combie Road. Combie Road begins at the northern end of the downtown commercial district along Placer Hills Road and extends to the northwestern corner of the Plan area. The road is generally flanked by dense vegetation, and many of the residences are largely concealed by mature sugar pines and shrubs. Combie Road provides a few of the limited public views of Lake Combie. Views of the lake are usually screened by vegetation even when the road is just few hundred feet from the lake. Views of the Plan area from Combie Road are of moderate quality and are generally common to the area.

Volley Road. Volley Road Y's off of Combie Road and continues west to Lake Combie. The rural estate homes in this area are generally hidden amongst the pines, which dominate the landscape and provide a protective intimate atmosphere to the area. The west end of Volley Road provides most of the views of Lake Combie available to the public. The views are partially screened by the dense sugar pine forest. Overall, the views of the Plan area from Volley Road are moderately vivid and of good quality.

Meadow Gate Road. Meadow Gate Road is one of the few thoroughfares in the Plan area and extends east from Placer Hills Road to the eastern boundary of the Plan area and on to the I-80 corridor. Although the road is generally flanked by dense vegetation, openings in the canopy are provided by residential lawns and a few small pastures. Views from Meadow Gate Road are of moderate quality and are common to the area.

Although no roadway is designated as a "scenic corridor," most roads are scenic and contribute to the rural atmosphere. Dense vegetation along many roads screens existing development and contributes to the perception of undeveloped, natural views.

Riparian Areas, Natural Land Forms, and Native Vegetation

A flat meadowland (Walgra Meadows) is in the center of the Plan area, surrounded by ridges of low to moderate height characterized by dark, dense mature trees and shrubs with openings of annual grassland. Wooley Creek bisects the meadow. The contrasts in form, color, and texture of this vegetation add visual variety and interest to the foothill viewscape.

Lake Combie is a unique landscape feature. High-quality views of this small reservoir are possible to residences on adjacent ridges. Views of the reservoir, framed by forested ridges in the middle ground and background and sparse to dense riparian vegetation in the foreground, are vivid. The concealed nature of nearby foothill residences contributes to the intactness of this view.

Lake Arthur, a small reservoir east of Lake Arthur Road at the southern tip of the Plan area, is a distinctive water feature. No vegetation softens the transition from road to water, but the view of the reservoir from the road is framed by intermittent tall trees in the middle ground and vegetated hills in the background.

Views of freeway traffic on I-80 along the southeastern border of the reservoir detracts from the intactness of the view. Views of the reservoir are moderately vivid.

IMPACTS

Criteria for Determining Significance

The State CEQA Guidelines (Appendix G) state that a project normally has a significant impact on the environment if it will:

- Have a substantial, demonstrable negative aesthetic effect.

Interpretation of this definition for the proposed project considers that creation of defensible space, shaded fuel breaks, and a healthy forest will result in a significant visual impact if it will:

- Substantially change high-quality or distinctive views of watersheds,
- Substantially change the quality of scenic corridors or views from scenic roadways,
- A moderately intensive degradation in landscape quality would be seen by a large number of relatively sensitive viewers, or
- A highly intensive degradation in landscape quality would be seen by any relatively sensitive viewers.

Relevant Community Plan Goals and Policies

The Community Plan includes various key goals, policies, and implementation programs relating to scenic resources, scenic routes, and community design.

Policies

- 1.K.1.** The County shall require that new development in scenic areas (e.g., river canyons, lake watersheds, scenic highway corridors, ridgelines, and steep slopes [especially Sugar Pine Mountain]) is planned and designed in a manner which employs design, construction, and maintenance techniques that:

- b. Incorporate design and screening measures which utilize natural landforms and vegetation for screening structures, access roads, building foundations, and cut-and-fill slopes consistent with the needs of the State Fire Safe and Fire District Defensible Space programs.

1.K.8. The County shall balance the desire to maintain heavily vegetated corridors along circulation routes to preserve their rural nature and perceived values as natural noise buffers with the need to reduce fuel loads (both the volume and density of flammable vegetation) along fire escape routes to increase safety for emergency fire equipment and evacuating civilians, to provide a point of attack or defense from a wildfire, and as fuel or fire breaks. [1/24]

Impact Analysis

Implementation of the Meadow Vista Vegetation Management Project would result in a change in the visual character of the area through a reduction in visual quality. The intent of the PTEIR is to maintain the existing forested condition of the Meadow Vista area while managing the vegetation for defensible space, shaded fuelbreaks, and defensible landscapes. Each one of these objectives means reducing the total amount of vegetation, and spacing out the remaining vegetation. Overall, the visual impact will be to keep the same basic forest types, only with a more open type appearance. Impacts will be reduced by restricting the silvicultural harvest systems that can be used under the PTEIR/PTHP system (see *Introduction and Project Description*). Allowing restricted systems and their associated post-harvest stocking standards required by current regulations will mean that existing sizes of trees will be maintained, but in a more open setting. This could open vistas to adjacent properties, impacting feelings of privacy and rural quality to some people.

Vegetation management operations would consist almost entirely of selective harvesting, which would not substantially alter the visual composition of forest stands. Although the reduced density of trees and groundcover resulting from selective harvesting would go unnoticed by many viewers, those who notice such changes are likely to perceive them as having an effect on visual quality. Full implementation of the Meadow Vista Vegetation Management Project by all landowners (an unlikely outcome) would significantly alter the visual regime. In many

respects, this represents a balancing of alternatives wherein visual quality is reduced in order to provide greater safety from wildland fire and to reduce wildland fire's ecosystem and aesthetic impacts.

Short-term visual effects of vegetation management would include the presence of fresh-cut stumps and slash accumulations in some cases. In the context of commercial forests such effects are common (though typically at a more intensive level) and consistent with most viewers expectations. In an urban/rural setting such as Meadow Vista, however, such effects will be noticeable to many residents.

Projects undertaken pursuant to PTEIR requirements will be allowed to burn only under restricted conditions. As a result, visual impacts from smoke will be reduced in comparison to fuel reduction completed without such controls.

In most cases, tree removal as part of a fuels reduction program will not remove dominant trees that top the skyline. More often, co-dominant trees, where all trees are roughly the same height will be thinned out for more open spacing. An exception would be when large dominant trees have disease, insect or structural problems and need to be removed for health or safety reasons. The defensible landscape treatment allows shelterwood and seed tree removal, which could allow for the harvest of some dominant trees; however, there is a specified leave tree standard for larger trees (i.e., trees 18 inches DBH or larger).

Major Residential Roads

It is alongside roadways where shaded fuelbreaks will be most effective as they take advantage of the open roadway as part of the vegetation modification area. On either side of the road, vegetation will be thinned with more open spacing. Such vegetation management would result in a minor reduction in the visual quality of views of the Plan area from major residential roads.

Streams, Riparian Areas, Natural Land Forms, and Native Vegetation

Vegetative management would result in alteration of vegetation near riparian areas and native vegetation. This impact is not considered significant because Forest Practice Rules and PTEIR mitigation measures protect such areas from intrusion.

MITIGATION

1. Restrict allowable silvicultural harvest methods to only those that maintain at least a minimum amount of mature overstory trees.
2. Leave a variety of size class vegetation in shaded fuelbreak areas, while still providing an adequate disruption of fuel continuity for fuelbreak function.
3. Complete clean-up of slash and organic debris in defensible space and shaded fuelbreak areas. Clean-up shall be by chipping, removing, or burning. Chipping shall occur no later than 45 days after the creation of the slash and debris. Piling for burning shall occur no later than 60 days after the creation of the slash or debris, with burning no later than April 1 of the year following creation or one year from the date of creation, whichever comes first. Removal shall occur no later than 60 days of the creation of the slash or debris. For clean-up purposes, shaded fuelbreaks shall be 100 feet either side of centerline of designated roads.

Level of Significance

Potential impacts to visual resources will be reduced by limited silvicultural practices proposed for fuel reduction purposes. Vegetative screening can be accomplished by selective removal of brush and understory to ensure privacy. Selective removal and replanting of native or other species to maintain a desired level of screening will reduce impacts to a less than significant level.